

“WOODROW WILSON AND THE REJECTION OF THE FOUNDERS’ PRINCIPLES”

WEEK 2 — RONALD J. PESTRITTO  CHARLES AND LUCIA SHIPLEY PROFESSOR IN THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

PROGRESSIVES BELIEVE THAT America needs to move beyond the principles of the Founding. Woodrow Wilson—who served as president of Princeton University, governor of New Jersey, and as America’s 28th president—was one of the earliest Progressive thinkers. His critique of the Founding—namely, his rejection of the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution’s system of the separation of powers—is one of the most articulate expressions of the Progressive movement’s core beliefs.

LECTURE SUMMARY

Woodrow Wilson wrote, “If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface.” Equality, natural rights, consent of the governed—these are not the fundamental principles that inform the purpose of government. Rather, Wilson argued that it is the list of grievances in the Declaration that demonstrates the proper role of government. Government exists to address and resolve practical problems, which change according to the circumstances of a specific time and place. As these problems change, so too does government.

The Founders held that the purpose and form of government was inextricably tied to a fixed and imperfect human nature. Wilson, on the other hand, argued that government must evolve because human nature itself is changeable, and has progressed beyond the limitations that the Founders identified. Far from fearing man’s capacity to form majority factions and trample on the rights of others as Publius warned in the Federalist Papers, Wilson held that human beings, now enlightened by the passage of time, could be entrusted with power without abusing it.

The progress of human nature and of government is tied to the idea of historical contingency, which means that each period of history is guided by different truths that change over time. The timeless self-evident truths that the Founders upheld in the Declaration of Independence are no longer applicable. As a result, the Founders’ structure of

government based on those principles, including especially the separation of powers, is no longer relevant, and indeed hinders the achievements of true justice.

Progressives thus rejected the limited government of the Founding in favor of an evolving Constitution.

KEY PASSAGES FROM THE READINGS

ADDRESS TO THE JEFFERSON CLUB OF LOS ANGELES ~ Woodrow Wilson

“If you want to understand the real Declaration of Independence, do not repeat the preface.”

“The question is not whether all men are born free and equal or not. Suppose they were born so, you know they are not.”

THE AUTHOR AND SIGNERS

OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE ~ Woodrow Wilson

“But such sentences do not afford a general theory of government to formulate policies upon. No doubt we are meant to have liberty; but each generation must form its own conception of what liberty is.”

“We are not bound to adhere to the doctrines held by the signers of the Declaration of Independence: we are as free as they were to make and unmake governments. We are not here to worship men or a document. [...] Every Fourth of July should be a time for examining our standards, our purposes, for determining afresh what principles, what forms of power we think most likely to effect our safety and happiness. That and that alone is the obligation the Declaration lays upon us.”

WHAT IS PROGRESS? ~ Woodrow Wilson

“All that progressives ask or desire is permission—in an era when ‘development,’ ‘evolution,’ is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle; all they ask is recognition of the fact that a nation is a living thing and not a machine.”

—*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, PAGE 641

“Some citizens of this country have never got beyond the Declaration of Independence.”

—*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, PAGE 641

“The Declaration of Independence did not mention the questions of our day.”

—*The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, PAGE 641

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is Woodrow Wilson important in the history of Progressivism?
2. What is “historical contingency?” What does it mean for the self-evident truths affirmed in the Declaration of Independence?
3. Why did Woodrow Wilson reject the Founders’ understanding of the separation of powers?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How have Woodrow Wilson’s arguments affected modern American government?
2. What is the difference between “natural rights” and rights granted by government?
3. Was Woodrow Wilson correct in arguing that advances in science, technology, and human nature have made the principles of the Founding obsolete?



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